

BLACK MESSIAH: THE FATHER DIVINE PEACE MISSION MOVEMENT

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WILSON WALLIS¹ notes that since the birth of Jesus Christ, 144 individuals have proclaimed themselves to be Christ, God, or the Son of God. The recurring phenomenon of self-declared messiahs is neither racially nor culturally bound; claims of divinity appear in the histories of numerous peoples. A contemporary American example is George Baker, known to millions as Father Divine. Although denounced as an anti-Christ by Negro leaders and white clergy,² who were ill-prepared to accept a semi-literate, five-foot-two, balding negro god, George Baker established one of the

more prosperous and influential social movements of this century, the Father Divine Peace Mission. Thousands of American Blacks, and not just a few whites, were profoundly affected by the movement; their economic, political, educational, and spiritual life uplifted. He fed and sheltered untold thousands, gave despondent people purpose and direction, and provided employment for the unemployed. He accomplished what charity and welfare had failed to do—help the helpless. At its peak the Father Divine Peace Mission maintained “Heavens” in most major cities, controlled properties valued in excess of ten million dollars, underwrote scores of needed social projects, and advised politicians and businessmen of the needs and rights of minorities. Although Father Divine is no longer living, his Peace Mission still functions, albeit tenuously, approximately forty-five years following its inception. This article explores the effect of Father Divine’s rhetoric upon the so-called true believer. Specifically, this paper examines how Father Divine persuaded thousands that he was God come-again, a proposition which in most quarters would be viewed as an expression of lunacy.

I

The Father Divine Peace Mission movement is difficult to chronicle. While several accounts³ of the movement exist,

³ The literature explicating the life and exploits of Father Divine is, for the most part, reportorial or popular biography. Given the

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¹ Wilson D. Wallis, *Messiahs* (Washington D.C.: American Council on Public Affairs, 1943), p. 32. See also, Arthur H. Fauset, *Black Gods of The Metropolis* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1944).

² Jan Karel Van Baalen, *The Chaos of Cults* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans 1942); Frederick Lieb, *Sight Unseen* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1939); Elam J. Daniels, *Father Divine: The World's Chief False Christ* (Winter Garden, Florida: The Biblical Echo Press, 1940). Daniels, whose book typifies the religious hysteria and prejudice expressed against Father Divine, remarks that “supernatural powers are at work in this false Christ movement. This will not be denied by anyone who has visited the banquets and felt the presence of some mysterious force. I myself felt so overwhelmed by this power that I prayed almost constantly for God to ‘hold on to me and not allow evil spirits to overpower me.’ This supernatural power explains why many intelligent white people become believers in Father Divine” (p. 51).

Father Divine's early history is clouded by scanty and conflicting evidence.⁴ It is known that George Baker, itinerant hedge trimmer, evangelist, and self-professed messiah, claimed to have experienced a miraculous "re-birth" on the Long Island Railroad (about 1920) and renamed himself Major Morgan J. Divine (not until about 1930 did he settle upon the name Father Divine). In 1915 Divine established a small colony of devotees in New York City. Situated in a four bedroom Brooklyn flat, he held public meetings and preached his unique message that God had risen in him, and that he possessed supernatural powers. By 1919, with a following totaling twenty-five, he purchased a modest twelve room home in Sayville, Long Island. Here, Divine established an employment agency, secured work for his followers, and quietly conducted his religious affairs. Seeking to enlarge his number of followers, who by 1929, numbered forty, he established a free employment agency

widespread social and religious implications of Father Divine it is somewhat surprising how infrequently scholarly research has focused upon the Peace Mission movement. Primary sources utilized in the conduct of this study consisted of publications produced by the Peace Mission, including *The Spoken Word* (semi-weekly publication, 1933-1936), *The World Herald* (weekly magazine, 1935-1937), and *The New Day* (weekly magazine, 1932—present). Thirty-two issues of *The Spoken Word*, fourteen issues of *The World Herald*, and eighty-seven issues of *The New Day* were examined for evidence of Father Divine's rhetoric. Approximately two hundred fifty sermons, addresses, and random observations of Father Divine were analyzed.

⁴ Father Divine feigned any knowledge of an earlier life, maintaining that he was "com-busted" as a mature adult in Harlem on the corner of Seventh Avenue and 134th Street in the year 1900. He did allow, however, that "I came to America that I might be called an American," but, as Jesus said, "Before Abraham was, I am." (*The New Day*, 23 Sept. 1944, p. 28) implying by this statement his presence at the birth of the universe. Two New York courts, though, determined that "Father Divine" was an alias for George Baker, born to Mary and Joseph Baker on a rice plantation on Hutchinson's Island, up-river from Savannah, Georgia, between the years 1875 and 1880 (Robert Allerton Parker, *The Incredible Messiah* [Boston: Little, Brown, 1937], p. 80).

and served magnificent Sunday banquets, *gratis*.⁵ Shortly, hundreds of people were eating in shifts of seventy-five. The banquets were feasts consisting of several varieties of meat and vegetable dishes prepared with exceptional culinary care. At the conclusion of each meal, Father Divine would address the gathering, working them into an ecstatic frenzy. Testimonial after testimonial witnessed to the miraculous power, generosity, affluence, and positive influence of Father Divine upon the lives of the faithful. Claims of healing and the recovery of lives from the grip of alcohol, drug abuse, and crime echoed nightly. Slowly but surely the fame of Father Divine escalated and the membership of the Peace Mission increased.

An inhospitable and unpleasant encounter with the Sayville law, involving Father Divine's revival-like meetings, soured him that, in 1932, he moved the Peace Mission's headquarters to New York where he rented a building at 20 West 115th Street. He became an instant celebrity in Harlem, his success encouraging him to establish "extension Heavens" in Baltimore, Newark, Jersey City, Bridgeport, and Seattle. At the height of the movement, 349 Heavens were operated in thirty-eight states and eleven countries, with a total membership estimated at 500,000 (probably no more than 20,000 people were classifiable as

⁵ One of the lingering debates concerning Father Divine was his ability to feed and shelter, free of charge, thousands of people. The mystery, however, was simple economics. His followers worked without pay, bartering their labor for food and residence. Moreover, upon entering the "Kingdom" a follower turned over to the movement all accumulated wealth. Followers who worked for outside employers turned their wages over to Father Divine. In addition, by buying farm lands and maintaining them with free labor, the dinner tables of the missions were kept plentifully stocked. Hotels and apartment houses were purchased cheaply, repaired and remodeled with donated supplies and labor, and each room was occupied by numerous boarders. The avoidance of income tax also increased the movement's profit margin.

true believers). The movement underwrote small businesses by the score, including dry cleaning establishments, restaurants, taxi companies, shoe repair shops, garages, farms, coal delivery firms, barbershops, grocery stores, and two weekly newspapers. A total of twenty-six businesses were sponsored in 1938 and by 1942, sixty-three. According to *The New Day*, official periodical of the movement, only twenty-nine establishments existed in 1956 and by 1965 only thirty-five extension Heavens remained open. Father Divine's weekly income, although never directly verified, was estimated to exceed \$20,000. (Father Divine never paid an income tax, although the Internal Revenue Service repeatedly investigated him. Virtually all properties and businesses were legally registered to his most faithful followers who supported Divine financially.)

In 1941, because of a legal judgment against him, Father Divine left Harlem and relocated the movement's headquarters once again, this time in Philadelphia. About 1942 Mother Divine, his wife, died. Inasmuch as Father Divine preached that believers in him would not perish, Mother Divine's demise was kept secret until 1946 when he married a twenty-one year old white Canadian, renamed Sweet Angel. With the exception of a minor furor generated by this marriage,⁶ Father Divine maintained a low profile, his activities reported only

⁶ Father Divine, angered by his followers' negative response to his interracial marriage, waxed that "We did not marry for self-indulgence, human affections, lust or passion, or any such cursed tendencies of mortality; but I brought before you a perfect picture, as a sample and example for all of the people to follow"; *The New Day*, 12 May 1951, p. 19. Moreover, each April 29 is celebrated as a feast day, described as an "international, interracial, universal holiday, commemorating the Holy Marriage of Father Divine and Mother Divine, symbolizing Christ and the Church and the Birth of the Church United"; *The New Day*, 28 Apr. 1956, p. 44.

occasionally by the media. As old age overtook him, he made fewer and fewer public appearances, and after 1960, he seldom was seen. He died, at approximately ninety years of age, in a Philadelphia hospital on September 7, 1965. The man who would be God, who walked with mayors and presidents, and provided for thousands, lay in his grave. Headlines flashed the news, "God is dead." Devotees (estimated in 1961 not to exceed ten thousand⁷) mourned his death and publicly expressed confusion concerning their fate and that of the movement. Sweet Angel, who ostensibly controlled the Divine properties and organization since the mid-fifties, deftly assured the faithful that Father would come again, that Divine's demise marked the beginning of the movement's second and more prosperous phase. Predictions were made that the movement would assume new life, become more powerful, and exert ever widening circles of influence. Such predictions, though, have failed to materialize. Today, the movement has shuttered most of its missions and manages the remainder with the donated labor of elderly women who, many years before, had dedicated their lives to the movement.⁸

II

Although to many, Father Divine's claim of divinity would appear ludicrous, an enormous number of individuals thought otherwise. Who were the principle followers of Father Divine? What led them to him? What conditions fostered the emergence of the movement? Some of the answers lie in the religious, economic, and social conditions of his fol-

⁷ Estimated from *The New Day* circulation figures reported 1 Oct. 1961 and placed at 9,775 copies per issue.

⁸ Today, the Father Divine Peace Mission maintains five "Kingdoms" in the United States and one each in Canada, Australia, and Switzerland.

lowers. Harlem in the thirties suffocated under an incredible burden of over-population, disease, unemployment, and discrimination. The tuberculosis death rate in 1933 was four times that of Manhattan, with syphilis seven times higher. Twice as many black mothers died in childbirth and only one hospital existed for 350,000 inhabitants. Between 1930 and 1935 six thousand youths were declared delinquent, drugs were commonplace, and prostitutes and pimps openly solicited. Forty percent of Harlem's work force was on relief and those finding work generally earned seventeen percent less than whites holding similar positions, while paying twenty percent higher rents. The tenements were poorly lit, badly ventilated, and seldom plumbed for toilets. Each acre of living space held an average of 450 persons. Educational opportunities for black children were appalling.⁹ In addition, the black churches of Harlem either were blind to these conditions or were unable to respond to their parishioners' needs. Robert Allerton Parker asserts that "at such moments as these, the Messianic hope thrusts itself into the consciousness of the defeated."¹⁰ This is not unlike Father Divine's own interpretation of his "coming": "Why is it that God comes to the most insignificant, the most illiterate, the most underprivileged, the most down-trodden among the chil-

⁹ This depiction of Harlem in the thirties is a composite picture gathered from several sources, including Sara Harris, *Holy Husband* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1953) pp. 49-73; Harris, *Father Divine: Newly Revised and Expanded* (New York: Collier, 1971), pp. 48-49; John Hoshor, *God In a Rolls Royce* (New York: Hillman-Curl, 1936), pp. 88-90; St. Clair McKelway, *True Tales From the Annals of Crime and Rascality* (New York: Random House, 1950), pp. 182-88; Roi Ottley, *New World Acoming* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), pp. 145-60; Charles Samuel Braden, *These Also Believe: A Study of Modern American Cults and Minority Religious Movements* (New York: Macmillan, 1957).

¹⁰ Parker, p. 59.

dren of men? He comes among them that He might lift them and bring down the loftiness of the mighty, and self-exalted."¹¹

But Father Divine was not the only messiah of Harlem. To the contrary, numerous fakes, charlatans, and mystics plied their trade among Harlem's innocent and gullible. Cult leaders with such sobriquets as Steamboat Bill, Sufi Abdul Hamid, Daddy Grace, Madame Fu-Fu-Tan, Joe World, Father Paul, Father Joshua, Elijah of the Fiery Chariot, and Father Obey competed vigorously.

George Wilson Becton's World's Gospel Feast was perhaps the most famous cult in late twenties, early thirties, to divert money from Harlem's poor. His career was cut short when, on the night of May 21, 1933, he was kidnapped and slain. The void left by Becton's death was filled by Father Divine. Sufi Abdul Hamid and Daddy Grace, however, were not content to allow Father Divine to usurp this spiritual marketplace. Sufi attempted to undermine Divine through false accusations and one-upmanship. When he charted an airplane to fly over Harlem at a higher altitude than had Divine a week earlier, the craft encountered engine failure and crashed, killing Sufi. Sufi's death encouraged Daddy Grace to challenge Father Divine's by now pre-

¹¹ Harris, *Father Divine*, pp. 2-3. This same theme is echoed time and again, as in the following example: "Mortality does not wish to look as I apparently am, but God is God just the same! Therefore, I came in the likeness of that which is despised and rejected by all mankind, even itself! That is why God is God. Because he came in the likeness of that which is despised by all mortality! Aren't you Glad! But I am so glad I came in the actuated words of expression by the birth of Jesus in a predicted birth in His coming, and in His personal mission He was despised and rejected of men but chosen of God and precious! These are facts and figures too stout to be denied and they must eventually be realized, for God has declared, 'That which has been spoken in secret, shall be made known on the housetop'; *The New Day*, 28 Oct. 1961, p. 2; originally printed, *The New Day*, 6 Jan. 1943, p. 4.

eminent stature. Through chicanery and subterfuge Daddy Grace had Divine evicted from one of his buildings but to no avail—Daddy Grace's attraction was minimal and Divine's followers remained faithful. Income tax problems eventually forced Daddy Grace to flee New York and take up residence in Havana.¹²

Father Divine distinguished himself from Harlem's other prophets by serving his followers' physical and spiritual needs, whereas others stole from the disadvantaged and returned to them only platitudes and vacuous promises. Father Divine not only provided shelter and sustenance, he also reshaped the faithful's perception of themselves and their lives, primarily by appealing to righteous living and the transcendence of earth-bound miseries. However, by conventional standards of rhetorical artistry, his speeches border on the crude and incomprehensible. The majority of Divine's messages were after-dinner discourses or sermons recorded by as many as twenty-six stenographers who seldom left his side. Each speech, unedited for grammatical consistency or content, was reprinted for the benefit of those followers unable to witness the address. The speeches, several hundred of which are preserved, bring to the listener the message of peace, prosperity, and salvation. And, as Divine put it: "I am not preaching emotion; I am not preaching vibrations; I am not preaching inspiration; I am preaching the Inspirator. I am not preaching blessings; I am preaching the Blesser . . . and when you consummate the whole thing into one, whatsoever it may be, you worship the One that is controlling that and is bringing it into manifestation."¹³

Father Divine's sermons contain contorted figures of speech which befuddle

understanding. "As an orator, Father Divine's eloquence was crude, but to his followers the sermons were filled with words that released a hidden power. His language re-created their personalities, his words inspired them with a new zeal, and his endless repetitions imprinted his ideas upon their subconscious minds."¹⁴ Speaking in a high lilting voice he frequently formulated new words by converting adjectives or nouns into verbs. Typical examples include: "visibilating," "begation," "metaphysicalizationally," "anti-supernegation," "lubrimentality," and "reincarnatable." Although polite society may have smirked at Father Divine's language,¹⁵ to his followers it was inspired, divine lexical understanding, and he offered no apologies for his word choice, insisting that he adapted his language to his followers: "I am what I am; and you see Me as I am, as I have heard some say, 'I see You and You is.' It matters not what they say, I understand them. They may make grammatical errors, for I make them with them for a purpose, that they might understand Me; that I might be with them in their grammatical errors and erroneousness."¹⁶ Moreover, Father Divine never prepared a speech. His speeches, each approximately fifteen minutes in length, were spontaneously inspired. As he put it, "I would not deem it necessary to prepare a message."¹⁷

The rhetorical strategies of Father Divine, however, were far from crude. They evidence a sophisticated understanding of human emotions, attitudes, and behavior. Essentially, Father Divine faced two rhetorical tasks. First, he had to establish his credibility as a divine be-

¹⁴ Marcus H. Boulware, *The Oratory of Negro Leaders* (Westport, Connecticut: Negro Universities Press, 1969), p. 207.

¹⁵ C. B. Crumb, "Father Divine's Use of Colloquial and Original English," *American Speech*, 15 (1940), 327.

¹⁶ *The New Day*, 1 Sept. 1938, p. 23.

¹⁷ Braden, p. 5.

¹² Harris, *Father Divine*, pp. x-xvi, 54-58.

¹³ *The New Day*, 19 May 1951, p. 4.

ing. Secondly, Father Divine had to "re-structure" his followers' attitudes toward the world and themselves.

Unquestionably, Father Divine was the Messiah to many of Harlem's poor: "There is no doubt that in the minds of the 'children' that they are face to face with God."¹⁸ Yet, in the early stages of the movement, Father Divine referred to his divinity obliquely, vacillating and hedging when directly confronted with the question. One of Divine's early and stunning examples of theological gobble-dygook explains his divinity: "Because God made himself flesh, it was observable, it was concentratable; in other words, it could be concentrated upon by individuals concentrating on something that was observable, that which was visible being concentratable, individuals concentrating on something, the reaction of such concentrating thoughts caused the reproduction of that which was invisibly incarnated in that on which that individual concentrated, to be transmitted to those who have concentrated on such."¹⁹ Perhaps fearful of the Christian clergy, for years he neither claimed nor denied a messianic attribution, indicating only that "I teach that God has the right to manifest Himself through any person or thing He may choose."²⁰ He ordinarily reserved such subtle word choice for the press and courtroom, as in "If My followers believe that I am God and in so doing they are led to reform their lives and experience joy and happiness why should I prevent them from so doing?"²¹ Within the in-

ner confines of the movement, however, he insisted that his followers recognize his divinity. A sign in his office, for example, is reputed to have read "Father Divine has brought peace to the Nation, He is God." And, on at least one occasion, August 17, 1937, he told feasting listeners: "Here you are and there I am, there I sit and here you stand, and yet I sit and stand as well as sit in the midst of the children of men. As you are so am I and as you may be so am I that you might be partakers of the nature and characteristics of Christ."²² Carefully couching a hint that he may have persuaded himself to his own divinity, Divine reflects that:

I do not know anything less than what you know! As I declared many years ago before you heard ME say, "I AM GOD," thousands and thousands and thousands and even MILLIONS declared MY DIETY and continued to declare it! With such a declaration iterated and reiterated over and over again, if I would not have known WHO I AM at this time I would be converted to know I AM GOD! . . . When you preach it so much and so vividly, constantly and continually, naturally, someone will get converted to it! Can you not see the mystery! If I had known WHO I AM, . . . I would have at this time of the day been CONVERTED into it to BELIEVE it and then KNOW IT even as you know it!²³

But by 1951, Father Divine became less and less concerned with public backlash and boldly announced: "I have personified Myself, Almighty God! I have personified Myself, God Almighty! In the name of the lamb to the River of Jordon I came! . . . I am entering into My glory now! Full of grace and of truth."²⁴

Father Divine combined verbal verification of his deity with substantive proof in the form of "miracles." To the followers of Divine he was limitless in every way desired.²⁵ Truly, it was mirac-

¹⁸ Hadley Cantril and Muzafer Sherif, *The Psychology of Social Movements*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1941), p. 133.

¹⁹ *The New Day*, 20 Aug. 1934, p. 11. See also Philip Alexander, "Father Divine," *Saturday Evening Post*, 18 Sept. 1934, p. 9; Edward Palmer, "Father Divine," *Quarterly Journal of Higher Education Among Negroes*, 13 (1945), 257.

²⁰ L. Levick, "Father Divine is God," *Forum* 92 (1934), 217.

²¹ S. Denlinger, "Heaven Is In Harlem," *Forum* 95 (1936), 215.

²² *The Spoken Word*, 18 Aug. 1936, p. 17

²³ *The New Day*, 16 Sept. 1950, p. 3.

²⁴ *The New Day*, 28 Apr. 1951, p. 4.

²⁵ *The New Day*, 20 Oct. 1954, p. 16.

ulous that although Father Divine was a multi-millionaire, he never paid taxes. And where did his immaculately tailored suits, several baronial estates, Rolls Royces, and rich farm lands come from if not miracles? Father Divine explained such bountifulness as the "outer expression of a percent of a percent of a percent, of a sketch of a reflection of the condition of the mind within. It is the outpicturing of a percent of a percent of a sketch of a reflection of the limitless blessings I have in the storehouse for the souls of the children of men."²⁶ To the hungry and despondent, however, the greatest miracle was the daily banquets, free to those unable to pay and 15¢ to those who could. It is estimated that Father Divine served between 2,500 and 3,000 meals daily from 1933 to 1940. Moreover, since he provided lodging at a steeply discounted rate, he shortly was the "outstanding lodging house keeper of Harlem. He operated . . . three apartment houses, nine private houses, and between fifteen and twenty flats."²⁷ Approximately 1,500 individuals resided in Divine-owned buildings in Harlem. Hundreds of converts claimed miraculous cures from terminal diseases, drugs, alcohol, and at least one woman is reported to have been raised from the dead! The movement's newspapers were rife with these and similar accounts of Father Divine's miracles. In fact, Father Divine would claim as an example of his miraculous power any event or phenomenon that could not be accounted for by logical processes.

From the early stages of the movement fear was a predominant rhetorical strategy, employed primarily to hold the movement together. Father Divine warn-

ed his followers that punishment would befall them should they stray from him. "Those who criticize My work and My message and Me as a person I say retribution is assured and is sure to you and to your city until your representatives and your city as a population repent in dust and ashes and confess their sins."²⁸

The first recorded instance of retribution brought immediate fame to Father Divine. While residing in Sayville, Long Island, he was declared a public nuisance and on the night of November 15, 1931, the police department entered the Divine residence, arresting everyone present. Eighty followers were jailed, fifty-five of whom pleaded guilty to disturbing the peace and were fined \$5.00 each. Father Divine was released on \$1,500 bail. Divine was incensed, arguing that the color of his skin provoked the charge of "public nuisance." The novelty of a black messiah and the charge of racial discrimination made interesting copy, and newspapers publicized the incident. On May 24, 1932, Father Divine reported for trial.²⁹ The presiding Judge, Lewis J. Smith, from the opening moments of the trial, exhibited prejudice toward Divine. Although Father Divine was defended brilliantly by James C. Thomas, a black lawyer who had served as U. S. Assistant District Attorney, Judge Smith consistently overruled Thomas' objections and, before the jury retired to deliberate, opined that Divine was a heretic and public nuisance. Upon receiving the jury's decision of guilty, Judge Smith imposed the maximum sentence under law, one year imprisonment and a \$500 fine. Hoshier reports that one woman sobbed hysterically as Father Divine was led away. A man comforted the woman

²⁶ *The New Day*, 9 Feb. 1939, p. 20, and *The New Day*, 26 Dec. 1940, p. 43.

²⁷ Grady Demus Davis, "A Psychological Investigation of Motivational Needs and Their Gratification in the Father Divine Movement," Diss. Boston Univ., 1953 p. 186; cf. Harris, *Holy Husband*, p. 56.

²⁸ *The New Day*, 4 Aug. 1945, p. 3.

²⁹ Accounts of the trial and events leading up to it are retold with remarkable similarity by each of Divine's biographers. This probably is due to the wide-spread coverage given the

by saying, "Don't pity Father Divine but pity the Judge who sentenced him. The judge can't live long now, he's offended Almighty God."³⁰ Judge Smith died four days later, suddenly and unexpectedly, of a heart attack at the age of fifty-five. News of this event rocked the followers of Father Divine, confirming their belief in his divine and retributive powers—there was no question that Father Divine's hand had struck the judge dead. With remarkable psychological restraint and rhetorical effectiveness, Father Divine issued the following statement from his cell: "I hated to do it."³¹ Father Divine was released on bail June 24, 1932, and on January 9, 1933, an appeal instigated by James C. Thomas to the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court in Brooklyn, reversed Judge Smith's decision.

The success of the Sayville incident motivated Father Divine to instruct his staff to search news reports daily for depictions of disastrous events that could be attributed to him. Every imaginable event was ascribed to the cosmic energies supposedly controlled by Father Divine: "The Cosmic forces of nature obey me and work harmoniously for all who are conscious of my actual presence on earth among men, but they work havoc and destructively against those who think wickedly and choose to ignore me; those who rise against me should take cognizance of it for that which a man soweth he shall reap for retribution is sure and retribution is assured."³² The deaths of Judge Smith, Will Rogers, Hitler, and Tojo, as well as the Coconut Grove night club fire in Boston, killing 491, the Houston Gulf Hotel fire, killing 49, and the Texas-

Oklahoma tornado in April, 1947, killing 177, were attributed to Divine.³³

At Rockaway Beach, New York, in 1917, and at Miami Beach in 1947, Father Divine and his staff were turned away from fashionable beach hotels which did not admit Negroes. The morning following each rejection, tons of dead fish washed ashore, ruining swimming facilities for a week. To Divine's followers these events were not coincidental. Fear of Father Divine's wrath held his followers fast to the movement. Ruth Boaz, one of Divine's early converts who later left the movement, believes that the "grip of Father Divine upon his followers was so inexorable that very few escaped," and those who did, lived "in a form of mental bondage conditioned by a strange nameless fear."³⁴ In sum, the rhetorical impact of miracles and threats confirmed Father Divine's deity for his followers.

The second, and perhaps more difficult, rhetorical problem which Father Divine encountered was the "reshaping" and "molding" of his followers' attitudes toward both themselves and the world. Father Divine demanded of his followers total and absolute obedience, "since it is a matter of being born into this family by taking on the characteristics, the nature of the Spirit of Jesus and becoming to be adopted or born into the Royal Family by so doing."³⁵ An individual's pre-conversion attitudes were rejected by Divine, who insisted that new attitudes, regarding nearly every aspect of life, supplant the old. Father Divine insisted that his followers lead a chaste

event by local and national media. Most critics consider the Sayville incident as the key event giving the Peace Mission momentum.

³⁰ Hoshor, p. 84.

³¹ Hoshor, p. 85; Harris, *Holy Husband*, p. 45; Harris, *Father Divine*, p. 41.

³² *The Spoken Word*, 11 Aug. 1936, p. 5.

³³ *The New Day*, 25 Nov. 1950, pp. 26-27; *The New Day*, 24 Nov. 1951, p. 9; Marcus Bach, *They Have Found a Faith* (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1946); St. Clair McKelway and A. J. Liebling, "Who is This King of Glory?" *New Yorker*, trans. 27 June 1936, pp. 22-32; and 13 June 1936, pp. 21-28; 20 June 1936, pp. 22-28.

³⁴ Ruth Boaz, "My Life With Father Divine," *Ebony*, 13 Sept. 1965, p. 88.

³⁵ *The New Day*, 11 Aug. 1938, p. 29.

existence, refraining from drinking and smoking, loud and abusive language, sexual intercourse and procreation, accepting welfare, establishing credit, or accumulating wealth, and acknowledging past friendships, acquaintances and family ties. To the true believer the rejection of drink, sex, easy credit, and past affiliations "purified" the body and soul, making it possible for God to enter one's consciousness, the righteous individual miraculously obtaining the attitudes and attributes of God. "When you recognize God's actual presence . . . you will . . . act differently and think differently and by taking on new characteristics and a new disposition you will be a new creature automatically, and you will not even have the old character you once had."³⁶ The new convert experienced a physical, mental, and religious reawakening, emerging an "immortal soul": "Their old nature and identity were lost in this spiritual resurrection."³⁷ In sum, one's prior existence was cast aside, making way for Father Divine to remold the personality. "When you have cancelled all your preconceived ideas and opinions about yourself as a personality, then you shall live forever."³⁸

Father Divine's discourses evidence four fundamental themes; (a) alleviating discrimination and poverty, (b) protecting the faithful from adversity, (c) formulating self-respect, and (d) clarifying "reality." Not by coincidence did these themes constitute the major problems which oppressed Harlem.

Clearly, Father Divine capitalized upon the stifling economic and social pressures experienced by the ghetto Black. He saw in discrimination and poverty a means by which to attract converts. Throughout his career, for example, Father Divine railed against discrimina-

tion: "I have come to give you victory over difficulties, over races, creeds, and colors, over segregation, over prejudice."³⁹ Righteous believers were told to accept the equality of races:⁴⁰ "To recognize and realize *E Pluribus Unum*, where there will be no more divisibility of the children of men but all will live in unison together and will partake of the great one eternal Christmas, circumferencing and enveloping the Hindus Christmas . . . the Christian Christmas and New Year and all of them combined."⁴¹ In addition, Father Divine addressed himself to the issue of poverty, promising to provide the faithful with the material dimensions of existence. "The consciousness of God's presence will not only bring houses and land and wealth beyond your fondest imagination, but the consciousness of God's presence will bring every desirable blessing into outer expression . . . I have the key to all underground treasure and the key to the secrets of the ages and the mysteries of the saints and sages."⁴² As if to dispel any disbelief on the part of the sceptic, Father Divine iterated: "This is not supposition; this is not an imagination; but by your present experience of what you hear, as you are conscious of GOD'S

³⁹ *The New Day*, 18 Oct. 1955, p. 23.

⁴⁰ Father Divine's wealth and influence exerted considerable political clout; power which he employed in his fight against prejudice and discrimination. In 1936, for instance, he conducted the "International Righteous Government Convention of Father Divine's Peace Mission," with five thousand in attendance. Although the first item of business at the convention was a unanimously accepted motion declaring Father Divine God, a party platform was established which included, among other items: (a) legislation outlawing discrimination in public places, (b) legislation sanctioning media use of words with racial implications, (c) legislation outlawing lynch mobs, (d) legislation abolishing capital punishment, (e) repeal of all laws requiring a person to declare his race or creed, and (f) legislation abolishing political patronage. A complete enumeration of the party's planks are reprinted many times in *The New Day*, originally appearing 17 Feb. 1936, pp. 6-7.

⁴¹ *The New Day*, 6 Jan. 1951, p. 3.

⁴² *The New Day*, 16 Sept. 1950, p. 14.

³⁶ *The World Herald*, 19 Nov. 1936, p. 4.

³⁷ Davis, *Father Divine*, p. 166.

³⁸ Parker, p. 92.

presence, even if you take it that way, I have a-plenty to eat, to drink and to wear, and I have plenty of automobiles to ride in; comfort and convenience for you and for Me! Even if it is only your consciousness of GOD's presence in Person, that consciousness is the source of all supply, with the spirit thereof, and it will satisfy every Good desire."⁴³ Surely, Father Divine's proclamations to end discrimination and to supply his followers with their physical needs bolstered the faithful's image of the world.

Father Divine numbered among his followers hundreds who had come from lives of crime, prostitution, vagrancy, alcoholism, drug addiction, and rascality; life experiences which ordinarily lessen one's self-image and foster excuse finding. A believer was prohibited from maintaining or safeguarding a pre-conversion behavior pattern. Divine warned that all "mortal habits, systems, ways, and ideas are weights. When you have thrown off the weight and the sin you will run the race that is set before you."⁴⁴ Devotees were admonished not to seek scapegoats or to speak poorly of others. Individuals who rationalized that outside forces or groups were responsible for their plight were informed that they alone were responsible for their station in life, but that belief in Father Divine would protect them from misfortunes. "It is a glorious privilege to have protection that can save you wheresoever you are, above all opposition and above all opposing forces. . . . The Cosmic forces of nature, yea, cyclones, tornadoes, volcanoes, and storms will not do you any harm if you are lost in the will of God and are protected by Him."⁴⁵

The third theme Father Divine addressed himself to was the convert's im-

age of self. He preached that a righteous individual was one with God. "If you are one with the impersonal, I receive you personally as one with the Impersonal for I could not receive you effectively personally and refuse to receive you personally; and I could not receive you effectively impersonally and refuse to receive you personally; for you are in perfect harmony with the reality of your higher self—impersonally."⁴⁶ Divine's insistence that his followers "think positively" assisted them in developing an affirmative self-image. "We shall think in the positive and constructive way of expression so vividly until we will not have time to create or bring into expression any sense of negation. The positive is a reality! We dispel the negative and undesirable by the positive and desirable. Light dispels the darkness. The positive dispels the negative and the negative is no longer a reality where the positive has been actually established."⁴⁷ The results of positive thinking, Divine suggests, bring one nearer to universal truth and communion with God. "The effect of the positive attitude—constantly thinking of Father and thanking Him—is to cause the thought to enter 'the sub-conscious mentality' so that your very sub-consciousness got it, then and there, you had it. Now isn't that wonderful? As you had it, so you have it. By this you can . . . cause mankind to observe that which you have been thinking . . . the great Universal Brotherhood of man and the conscious recognition of the FATHERHOOD of God. . . ."⁴⁸ Individuals who previously had been unsuccessful in affirmatively defining themselves now possessed an elevated sense of being, recognizing life to have an awesome, an inspiring meaning—the comingling of self with God.

⁴³ *The New Day*, 20 Jan. 1951, p. 5.

⁴⁴ Parker, p. 191.

⁴⁵ *The New Day*, 31 May 1952, p. 17.

⁴⁶ *The New Day*, 9 Feb. 1939, p. 20.

⁴⁷ *The New Day*, 29 Sept. 1938, p. 47.

⁴⁸ *The New Day*, 9 July 1936, p. 4.

Finally, Father Divine's speeches gave meaning and understanding to individuals who were confused or frustrated by encounters with a seemingly chaotic world. Divine defined the world and provided consistency and stability to the believer's immediate milieu.⁴⁹ Any feature of reality which was potentially confusing or contradictory to Divine's teachings was clarified by him. To the faithful Father Divine possessed the answers to the riddles of life since he was perceived to be God; as such, his messages constituted indisputable truth, untarnished knowledge that had to be grasped and retained. Moreover, a true follower was forbidden to speak to strangers or nonbelievers except when required by practicality or polite manners. While the Bible and the Divine newspapers were required reading, other media sources were censored. Followers memorized and recited Divine sayings, phrases, speeches, and chanted catchy songs. Since Father Divine's followers be-

⁴⁹ Father Divine, it seems, was cognizant of this attitude-forming role: "As a practical and scientific psychologist I speak and act the actuated words of expression. I am giving you a practical course in psychology for the life of all humanity by the life we are daily living." This quotation appears in *The New Day*, 28 Oct. 1961, p. 2, and an almost identical statement appears in *The New Day*, 28 July 1938, p. 48; and *The New Day*, 2 Jan. 1943, p. 4.

lieved him to be all-knowing, they dismissed the need to consult additional sources for validation. Father Divine thus shielded the convert from competing "realities."

III

Emerging from an obscure origin, Father Divine became one of the most influential Black leaders of our time. He brought hope to thousands whose lives were destitute and empty. His Peace Mission movement reached, at its height, at least 500,000 people and maintained missions throughout the world. And against the scandalized opposition of conventional clergymen, Divine was defiant:

If causing millions to become prosperous and independent where they were once in poverty and underprivileged; if causing millions to be lifted from the Relief Rolls and from the bread lines; if causing those millions by the Spirit of fanaticism to return all stolen goods and to pay for all just debts, causing them to live soberly, righteously and Godly, being honest, competent and true, refusing even slightly to indulge in intoxicating liquors and beers, smoking and using obscene language, or gambling on horse races, playing the numbers and all types of gambling rackets be insanity, then bring the perfect person or persons who have sanity and intelligence and let them teach us something.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ *The New Day*, 13 Mar. 1941, p. 76.

